

The Joint Senate-House
Republican Leadership
Press Release
June 9, 1966

Representative Gerald R. Ford
Senator Everett M. Dirksen

MR. FORD: James Reston in the New York Times on May 17th last wrote: "What he (LBJ) wants is worthy of the faith and confidence of the nation, but this is precisely what he does not have because his technique blurs his conviction. He is mixing up news and truth. He is confronted, in short, with a crisis of confidence."

This statement expresses a point of view and a deep regret, both of which we in the Republican Party fully share.

On May 25, 1966, 19 distinguished Republican members of the House of Representatives, including our entire leadership, catalogued and summarized on the floor of the House the detailed reasons why this crisis of confidence has resulted. We have seen this in almost every aspect of the domestic scene. It has been revealed on the President's budget messages and management. It has appeared in the War on Poverty. It has emerged relative to the NASA program. It was vivid in wage-price guidepost disputes with labor and with management. It was startling in his action on surplus sales of industrial stockpiles and farm products. It became bewildering in Federal job multiplication figures. It surfaced again in appointments to high level offices. It proved

shocking in the President's uncertain assessment of the economy. In all these categories of confidence doubt has developed and the American people have, not at all surprisingly, steadily lost faith in a President who is rapidly losing touch with them. A consensus of no confidence is coming to pass.

Constructively, positively, let it be recorded here and now that the Republican opposition wants with all its heart and energy to support the President of the United States when he is either right or of the right intent. In such cases it will always do so, but the Republicans in the Congress (and, indeed the Democrats in Congress as well) cannot know what is right or of right intent in the President's policies unless they have the facts upon which to base their judgments. The facts are all too seldom given us by this Administration.

There are those in this Administration who appear to believe that half-a-truth is better than none. We disagree. Where the American people at home are concerned we must have the whole truth. Where the American people in their foreign interests and national security are concerned, we must be given every fact consistent with our safety. Given such facts as to domestic and foreign policy, we in Congress will, with all the people, be reassured that the soundest, the sanest, the best possible decisions will be made in these days to come.

As of this date, as the record so clearly proves, we have not been given and are not being given the vital facts of the American

life by the Johnson-Humphrey Administration. We do not charge the Administration with falsehood but we do claim that it has failed to reveal the whole truth. This being so, this crisis of confidence is inevitable and the consequent danger to the American people is great.

Therefore, our Question-of-the-Week: Mr. President, what CAN we believe?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: James Madison, fourth President of the United States, at a time when our nation was imperiled wrote: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both."

Our nation is imperiled now.

On December 13th last, the Republican Coordinating Committee, in a statement unanimously agreed to by the membership, declared its own conviction and position with respect to the conflict in Vietnam. The first two sentences of the Declaration were these:

"Questions are being raised both at home and abroad as to the devotion of the American people to peace. One cause of this confusion has been the inability of the Johnson Administration to establish a candid and consistently credible statement of our position in Vietnam."

The two words, "candid" and "credible" are those most meaningful and most relevant to the point we make today: The Johnson-Humphrey Administration refuses even yet to be either candid or consistently credible with respect to its policies and our position in Vietnam.

If this, like Madison's, is a time of clear and present danger, it is essential now, as it was then, that the people be fully informed

as to the problems and the perils confronting them and as to the effective steps it is planned to take to solve those problems and protect them from these perils.

All too consistently, the Johnson-Humphrey Administration has failed, either by oversight or intent, to take the Congress and the American people into its proper confidence regarding Vietnam. Such a failure is inexcusable and it could be tragic.

No American, in public life or in private life, for that matter, wishes or seeks to know the details of any plan or program that must, in the interest of our national security, be kept in executive confidence, but every American does have the right to know where we are going in Vietnam and how far and to what clear purpose. Such information has been given us by the Johnson-Humphrey Administration and has been infrequent and incomplete.

For this reason, therefore, I urge again that the President convene immediately a bipartisan Leadership Conference for a discussion and examination of American policy in Vietnam. I urge this in order that the American people through their elected representatives in the Congress might better understand the shape of things to come. Armed by such understanding, they will be better able to provide that unqualified support that is so necessary to the winning of a swift, secure and honorable peace.

Unless, by such means, the people are respected in their right to know we cannot help but ask this Question-of-the Week (and, indeed, of every week): Mr. President, what CAN we believe?

Parenthetically, as I recall (correct me if I'm wrong) the last Bipartisan Leadership meeting at the White House occurred on the 24th of February; so that's quite some time back. To be sure, there have been some individual visits, but I'm speaking now about bipartisan leadership in both branches sitting around the table with the Administration leaders where questions can be asked and answers sought, to some of the things that either confuse or baffle people.

QUESTION: Who called for the Senate meeting about a week ago? Was there a phone call from the White House? If so, we didn't hear any more about it. How did you get talked out of this meeting before?

SEN. DIRKSEN: I didn't get talked out of it. I don't quite know, Roger, what you mean. I made the suggestion. It is certainly not for me to utter an imperious command and say do this, let's have a meeting on this date. After all, the President is a free agent and he can have a meeting if he wants to or not have it. We just refresh him on the fact that we think it's about time to have a meeting.

QUESTION: You did say a week ago that you had been satisfied by the President that it wasn't quite as urgent as you had thought. I wonder if anything has happened in the past week to make it more urgent.

SEN. DIRKSEN: Well, there probably are some things. I might make it a little more emphatic, but I would prefer not to go into any detail.

QUESTION: You mean developments?

SEN. DIRKSEN: Yes, I think so.

QUESTION: Senator, do you... If this meeting is convened and you people are agreed, will the Republicans then feel the unqualified support you seem to promise here.

SEN. DIRKSEN: Just so long as we have a good sense of direction and know that nothing is being left undone in order to get to the conference table or to win a victory, either one, there is no reason why we shouldn't give our support.

QUESTION: Senator, how come the President revealed what is in the interests of National security and what is not.

SEN. DIRKSEN: Well, that's one of those delicate things and you have always to evaluate it and see whether it ought to be uttered there. We've always been enjoined to secrecy when we go to those meetings and I've been careful, certainly always, to respect that secrecy when it was requested.

QUESTION: Senator, can you give the assurance... Can you assure us that you would give this unqualified support. Do you have any way of assuring the President other Republicans will give similar support?

SEN. DIRKSEN: Oh, I speak for myself. I think that would be true of Republicans. That generally has been our position.

MR. FORD: Let me add that if we have this opportunity where we would have an ample chance to ask questions, make suggestions, if we felt that was a full and complete disclosure of all of the pertinent information that was necessary, speaking for myself, I would join

in the statement made by Senator Dirksen. I think both of us would reflect the views of the Joint Leadership. This is what we intended to imply by the statement here this morning.

QUESTION: Doesn't this change a campaign issue...

MR. FORD: I don't think so because we as Republicans have repeatedly said that we were not going to make Vietnam a political issue and I don't think we have. The American people, on the other hand, may well, if they decide things don't go the way they think they should, make Vietnam a campaign issue. Our call for a conference and the right kind of a conference doesn't put Vietnam in a political situation, it doesn't throw it into the political arena, it simply indicates that we want to know, we ought to know, and if we do know we can be more helpful.

SEN. DIRKSEN: Jerry, let me add, and I want to be very responsive to your observation. Frankly, I just can't imagine a responsible person trying to equate the death of young men with a campaign issue.

QUESTION: Senator, you talk here about the American people have the right to know where we are going in Vietnam and how far and to what clear purpose. Are you convinced that the Government does know exactly how far we're going to go and what may lie ahead. Do you think they have that kind of answer to give?

SEN. DIRKSEN: We can only assume that men skilled in the art of warfare, who are among the best that we have produced, who are our military leaders, if they don't know then certainly as laymen we would not know whether we're approximating or approaching the kind of a goal that ought to be ahead of us. General Wheeler always attends those conferences. You have Admiral Rayburn of CIA. You are briefed from charts and from tables. You have the Secretary of State, you have the Secretary of Defense and anybody else who can offer pertinent and constructive information that is useful in giving orientation.

QUESTION: What I'm getting at, I think, is do you think they should know how this is going to wind up and where we're going to be six months or a year from now?

SEN. DIRKSEN: Well, you don't ask for details and you don't ask for those little specifics, but they should be able to give a pretty good indication of where we presently are, whether the goal is reasonably in sight and such other information as you can say would be reassuring to us and reassuring to the country.

QUESTION: Senator, what was it that President Johnson told you a week ago that gave you some satisfaction.

SEN. DIRKSEN: Well, Roger, I'm of the opinion, as I think back to the fact we had the last formal conference on February 24 (and that's what 3 months, going on 4 months) that probably it wasn't in his mind and certainly it wasn't in my mind that that length of time has elapsed since we've had a conference. I think if that had

been sharply in my mind, we might have had further discussion about it.

QUESTION: Have you talked to him since then about this matter, Sir?

SEN. DIRKSEN: Not this particular matter.

QUESTION: Since talking to the President, Sir, has the internal uproar in Vietnam altered your opinion?

SEN. DIRKSEN: No, I don't think so.

QUESTION: Would you call the briefing that the President had with you people last summer before the Vietnam build-up, was that not a Joint Leadership meeting also?

SEN. DIRKSEN: Yes, but that was last summer.

QUESTION: Last summer then; not last February.

SEN. DIRKSEN: I think our record indicates that we had the last meeting on February 24.

MR. FORD: If I recall accurately, the one that the Senator refers to was the one at the time the President was soliciting views on whether or not we should resume the bombing following the pause. And at that particular meeting there was a rather full disclosure and a full discussion. This was the last Joint House-Senate Bipartisan Legislative meeting with the Administration in the Executive Branch of the Government.

QUESTION: Isn't your renewal of emphasis on this subject today based on reports of the last few days coming out of Vietnam of a build-up of 400,000 troops... (rest inaudible).

SEN. DIRKSEN: Well then, report and rumor is one thing, but knowledge and facts are quite another. Now, we read some of these estimates. Are they on the nose, are they hard estimates, are they based on something right tangible and are they within the plans of the Administration. We do not know.

MR. FORD: Certainly, the statistics that have come from the Department of Defense in the last month or so, including one I believe this morning, the third or fourth in a row, to the effect that our casualties in South Vietnam were greater than the South Vietnamese is a very disturbing fact. One that should require, among others, the kind of a conference that Senator Dirksen and I are suggesting.

Thank you, gentlemen.